

WATER COVERED EVERYTHING, THEY SAID



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BEFORE ANYONE THOUGHT TO KEEP RECORDS OF water flow, the tribes who originally inhabited the shores of Monterey Bay had a very wet creation myth. Here is how it begins:

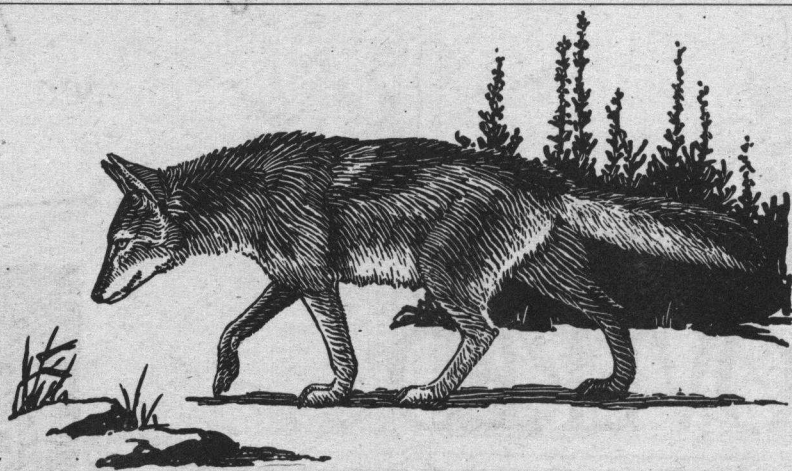
Water covered all they say.

Only peaks remained, they say.

Here Eagle and Hummingbird and Coyote took refuge, they say.

In Santa Cruz County on Monday, January 4, 1982, it seemed as though that old creation tale had been not a distant memory but a premonition and a prophecy.

Water covered everything. It fell straight down, because there was no wind through most of the day. There was no hail, no thunder, no lightning. The storm consisted only of water, falling from the sky in quantities no one had ever seen in this region or ever imagined they would see.



IT tore loose the sides of mountains, it sliced asphalt roads into little pieces. It cut down power lines, broke water mains, lifted houses from their foundations and tipped them or sent them skidding into canyons to be covered by the sickening flow of mud. The water turned quiet mountain creeks into ferocious destroyers. By the time they reached the lowlands and benchlands where the county's main towns are located, these waters had become roaring, churning monsters with lives of their own.

At peak of the flow sometime early Tuesday morning, a mud-thick flood was pouring along the bank of the San Lorenzo River at an estimated 40,000 cubic feet per second—300,000 gallons every second moving through the center of Santa Cruz. That much water alone would have done ample damage. But it carried a battering ram of uprooted stumps and redwood trunks and entire trees with limbs and roots.

Behind one bridge these timbers snagged, creating a small dam which grew into a logjam the size of a football field. It filled the small town of Soquel with water and a layer of mud. In downtown Santa Cruz the force of the flow and the all-day, all-night assault of thudding logs undercut the concrete moorings of a four-lane bridge, taking down the phone company's trunk lines and cutting off a main crosstown artery.

During these 24 hours of unrelieved downpour, so much sand and silt and mud was flushed through the San Lorenzo, a new and unprecedented delta has been formed beyond the mouth, a sandbar extending a hundred yards into the bay. With a full moon rising, at the end of this eventful week, there was a minus tide. Saturday afternoon I saw people walking out there where no one had ever set foot before.

Meanwhile, fanning back from the river mouth now spread for a mile along the beaches in both directions, you can see the piles of debris—an epilogue of white septic tanks, chunks of siding, broken boats, uncountable board feet of driftwood and surf-rolled timber.

It is the most profound disaster in the history of this county. And I think the impact has been sharpened by the kind of place this is. First, it is a county that has been settled rather recently. Though the Spanish mission was founded in 1791, over half the current residents have arrived here since 1970. (Total population as of the 1980 census count was 186,873.) This means a good many more than half were not here to experience the big flood of 1955, which held the previous record for high water and general damage. We have seen its memorial in the broad levee walls along the San Lorenzo which saved the business district from drowning. But for the typical resident in 1982, that flood of 26 years ago has been a legend rather than a reality. For most of us, the region more often than not has lived up to its reputation for a benign and livable climate.

Among the coastal counties of Northern California, Santa Cruz has seemed particularly blessed. For one thing, it has a southern-facing shoreline. The coast does not bend this dramatically again until you pass Point Conception 200 miles south. It has been superb farm and ranch country, but since the late 19th Century one of the county's prime roles has been as resort and recreation zone for Santa Clara Valley and the San Francisco Bay area. Ocean temperatures are the mildest between Santa Barbara and the Oregon border, while the southernmost ridges of the Santa Cruz Mountains normally serve as a protective arm to the west and north.

January 4, when these mountains with their timbered canyons and water-gathering creek beds suddenly became an adversary, it multiplied the shock factor. Nature then seemed doubly potent and fearful. It is possible to compare the storm to the grotesque series of murders that assaulted this community in the early 1970s, seeming to come out of nowhere with no connection to past or present. The rash of killings took us by surprise, bearing witness to a social unraveling which seemed at the time totally out of character in a region so pastoral and sunny.

This time the assault was not social but natural, primeval—the awesome force of water itself and water-loosened earth. The difference is that no malice is attached, there is no villain to go searching for, no one to blame. In the face of such power, one is finally humbled by the vast rhythms and cycles of natural law. If there is any redemption in the aftermath of this calamity, it can be found right there, in those cycles—nature's, and mankind's.

Human beings have a marvelous capacity to dig out, to bounce back. It is always inspiring to see a family or a neighborhood or a community gather its resources—such as we are seeing in this county now—and begin again.

That old tribal creation myth reminds us that these cycles of destruction and renewal have been going on for a long, long time. It probably was a song the tribe's chanter would sing at night by a fire on one of the beaches that surround Monterey Bay. After that opening verse, the next two went more or less like this:

Rain stopped, they say.

The waters receded, they say.

The animals walked down into the valley, they say.

Eagle saw a beautiful girl by the river, they say.

Eagle told Coyote to make her his wife, they say.

That the people would be lifted up again, they say.

James D. Houston is a Santa Cruz resident and the author of the novel *Continental Drift*. He and his wife, Jeanne, co-authored the book and screenplay *Farewell to Manzanar*. He is also the editor of *West Coast Fiction*.

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